LIBRARY INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN NIGERIA

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN CORNER, NATIONAL WOMEN CENTRE, ABUJA ON FRIDAY, MAY 30, 2008-05-30

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Introduction

To us intellectual freedom may simply be the right to think, say and do things as we wish. Intellectual freedom as conceived and put together by the ALA is more encompassing than we would ordinarily think that it is. The ALA defines intellectual freedom as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored" (LISWiki 2008). The human perspective of intellectual freedom as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 is that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

As librarians and information practitioners, we are interested in intellectual freedom because the products and services we practice with are the outcomes of intellectual activities. If intellectual freedom is threatened, our stock-in-trade are equally threatened, and so is our profession. Secondly, as information managers and communicators, we have to engage in and support those things that foster democracy, and intellectual freedom and access to information is one of them. As advocates of intellectual freedom and free access to information, we

joined the band wagon of those who want our fledgling democracy to become fully entrenched.

In pushing for the entrenchment of intellectual freedom and access to information the world over, IFLA has come up with an **Internet Manifesto,** which sees unrestricted access to information as indispensable and fundamental to freedom, equality, global understanding and peace. IFLA's position is premised on the following (IFLA, 2008):

1. *Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual both to hold and express opinions and to seek and receive information' it is the basis of democracy; and it is at the core of library service,*

2. *Freedom of access to information, regardless of medium and frontiers, is a central responsibility of the library and information profession.*

3. *The provision of unhindered access to the Internet by libraries and information services supports communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity and development,*

4. *Barriers to the flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty, and despair.*

The **Intellectual Freedom Statements** (2002) which ab initio was put together b the American Library Association (now Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, CILIP) is also significant for this write-up. Information access is a central theme in the statement, and to facilitate this access, there should be guaranteed right in all societies to information skills, universal access to information, knowledge about information, free flow of information, government commitment to informing the public, protection of privacy, and a committed library and information profession. It is from these perspectives, though with slight modifications

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in places, that this paper will look at the issue of library intellectual freedom and access to information in Nigeria.

Freedom of Expression

In general and relative terms, Nigerians now have freedom to express themselves more freely than in the military era. This freedom of expression, though comes with some cost(s) in certain instances, for example, denial of rights or becoming enemy of the government, certain interest groups or even individuals. The preceding position is to not to say that all Nigerians who ought to express themselves do so freely. There are silent or subtle forms of censorship in this country, and these are as dangerous to intellectual freedom and access to information as the open forms of censorship. Many Nigerian intellectuals and other educated people who should naturally express themselves freely and talk about the wrongs in the society have self-censored themselves This self-imposed restriction sometimes manifests itself through acts of sycophancy on the part of these well educated Nigerians, all in a bid to attract the patronage of authorities. This happens not only in government but also in the academia and other settings. The result is that those in government and some heads of academic institutions conduct themselves in clear vidation of our laws but yet go unchallenged. There are other ways of suppressing or impinging on intellectual freedom/freedom of expression. Those holding unpopular views may have cultists, militants or hired assassins sent after them, thus on our campuses and in the larger Nigerian society, many people are forced to keep their views to themselves. There are even instances where up till today, the lectures of those who hold opinions that are perceived as unpopular are recorded

through the teleguiding of b fellow lecturers and taken to people in government or in university administration. This act is reminiscent of the Babangida days when the government sought to punish those who were teaching what they were not paid to do. These acts impinge on intellectual/academic freedom.

Access to Information

In the Intellectual Freedom Statements (2000), the set of principles enunciated for information access states that:

> *The right of access to information is essential for a civilised society. If citizens are to exercise their democratic rights and to make informed choices, they must have access to political, social, scientific and economic information. If our culture is to thrive and to grow, people need access to the widest range of ideas, information and images. Computer and telecommunications technology is constantly changing and developing. Increasingly, it is converging in fast, widespread networked information and multimedia systems. Library and information services and the people who work in them, must also be prepared for constant change and development. They also need to be informed by basic principles to ensure that they can harness the power of new technologies for the benefit of their users.*

There are a lot of constraints to access to information in Nigeria. A lot of Nigerians are denied access to information on account of the intolerance of fellow Nigerians due to either ignorance, religious or ethnic sentiments. The deliberate policies of government such as the failure to pass the **Freedom of Information bill,** which has been before the National Assembly since 1999, resort to executive sessions by the National and State Assemblies, non-publication of hansards and other official transactions of government also hinder access to information. Another setback to information access is the failure of researchers to deposit research findings with the libraries of their institutions. The Nigerian society in general can be said to be a closed society, i.e., closed socially, culturally, legally, superstitiously and

religiously, and these apart from impacting negatively on expression of ideas also prevent certain people from accessing certain categories of information.

Access to information by the vast majority of Nigerians is hindered by the lack of knowledge and skills to use ICT's, and even their availability. Many Nigerian information users, including the intellectuals are unable to use electronic resources because of their non-availability or even where the resources are available, they are unable to use them due to lack of capacity to do so or the failure of infrastructures, for example, poor telecommunications and power facilities. It is worse still that librarians who should have the skills to assist users exploit ICT resources themselves lack these skills in most of the situations where the resources are available.

Our libraries, too are not helpful when it comes to facilitating access to current and quality information because they are stocked with out dated and irrelevant materials. This problem is brought about by poor funding, which cuts across all library types, be they academic, research, special or public. The federal university libraries, for instance, have not enjoyed material funding from the government since 2001. Our public libraries virtually depend on donations, most of which come from abroad and are not first rate materials. Some of these materials were discarded in their overseas libraries. The National Library of Nigeria is not doing any better because of poor funding, too. As the Library of last resort it is expected it will be funded to be able to acquire all the required materials regardless of where published and in what language, format, and at what cost but in ;practical terms this has not been achieved because of poor funding. The National Library of Nigeria cannot boast of up to five million volumes of books, monographs, documents, manuscripts, etc, for its over 40 years existence.

Equally appalling is the inability of most Nigerians to have access to libraries and their associated information services. For a population of over 140 million people, only 965 libraries were identified in the mailing list of the National Library of Nigeria, 2007. There are 276 academic and research libraries, 430 special libraries (including those of federal and state ministries and parastatals), the 36 states libraries (made up of about 200 branches) and the National Library of Nigeria with its 24 branches. Mobile library service is fast becoming a thing of the past because it is only in a few instances that they are provided. The majority of Nigerians, especially those in the rural areas, and the illiterate, both in urban and rural locations, do not have access to library services of any kind. The non-development of public library and information services in Nigeria is not due to lack of money but because of lack of political will, poor funding, poor infrastructure and a number of other factors. Most of the existing libraries have not gone electronic or virtual. Thus, virtually all our public libraries lack Internet and other electronic resources. The few electronic resources in our libraries are most of the time non-functional due to poor infrastructure. At the University of Abuja for instance, our efforts to come up with an e-library are fraught with a lot of problems, which are all too well known.

The Nigerian Government formulated the National IT Policy in 2001, which was immediately followed by the establishment of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) the same year as the organ responsible for the actualisation of the policy. Since coming into being in 2001, NITDA has undertaken a number of activities to entrench IT development in Nigeria. These include Public Service Network (PSNet), Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) and Human Capacity Development. PSNet was meant to make available IT infrastructure to facilitate service provision using it. It involved the provision of VSAT in each of the

36 state capitals and the Federal Capital to facilitate internet access using Broadband Access (BWA) technology NITDA has also developed the Mobile Internet Unit (MIU), which is a specially designed and fabricated local bus that used as a mobile training and cyber centre The bus is filled with ten networked high-tech work stations with Interrnet connectivity using VSAT to provide access to several IT resources The bus is also filled with printers, a photocopier and other multi-media facilities, and a generating set to guarantee uninterrupted power supply The MIU, though still at pilot stage, offers everything users would require in a modern cyber centre with he added advantage of being mobile. It can thus take the Internet to places such as rural areas, which otherwise would not have had access When fully functional, there are plans to deploy them to all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, as well as the 774 Local Government councils nationwide to provide not only Internet access but also offer other IT facilities and services

NITDA has also, with the support of multi-national and international organisations, conducted specialised workshops for train-the-trainer ;programmes on IT For instance, it hosted along with the International Centre for Theoretical Physics the first African Workshop on Open Source and Web Technologies for Development in 2003. If has also, along with UNESCO, undertaken the Virtual Library and Virtual Laboratory Projects in Nigeria It was towards this end that the Virtual Library Project was launched by the Federal Government in 2002. It was meant to be implemented in three phases between 2001 and 2010. Phase one covered the period 2001 to 2003, and was meant to facilitate virtual access by the libraries of all the 27 Federal Government Universities. It was also to enable them commence the digitization of some or all of their collections to facilitate their virtual access by

other libraries. To execute phase one, the National Universities Commission (NUC) was devolved with the responsibility of providing the facilities that would enable Nigerian federal universities go virtual. Beyond the Virtual Library Building at the NUC Headquarters in Abuja, which has been equipped with some internet-connected desktops, Nigerian university libraries are yet to go virtual or digital even as the time frame for phase one ended in 2003. Phase two of the Virtual Library Initiative was targeted at Federal Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, and was to be implemented between 2002 and 2005. Like the University libraries, the libraries of Polytechnics and Colleges of Education have no virtual access as yet. The third phase was targeted at the Universal Basic Education Programme and is to be implemented between 2007 and 2010. It is unlikely that the performance of this phase will be better than the two earlier ;phases. The result is that government attempts at ensuring virtual access for the libraries of its educational institutions have largely failed.

The implementation of Nigeria's IT policy by he NITDA is far from being successful, and neither is the virtual library project. There are a number of reasons for these failures, among them poor funding for IT development. The result is that apart from the failure to popularize IT usage through media campaigns, formal and informal training, etc, there is also poor infrastructural provisions, especially telecommunications facilities that can support adequate IT usage. This, for instance, makes Internet access and use in Nigeria to be very slow even as it is among the most expensive in the entire world. A second problem is the general literacy level in the country, which is estimated at about 60% and much lower still in terms of computer literacy. Ekoja (2007) established that among librarians in Nigerian

universities who rank among the best educated people in the country, ICT knowledge/skill acquisition and practice was below average. The implication of the low literacy rate, especially computer literacy, is that most Nigerians are unable to use ICT facilities. Another major problem is poor energy generation and distribution, which makes electricity supply very erratic and highly unreliable even in the majorly urban areas that are on the national electricity supply grid. In fact, in most rural areas energy supply to power IT equipment is non-existent. The above reasons and more are responsible for the failure for instance of the Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) :Project of the NITDA. The other reasons are the cost-intensive requirements for the purchase of the needed mobile vans and furnishing them with the requisite ICT facilities, and the poor motorable roads leading to rural settlements for which the project was intended.

Information Skills

To guarantee intellectual freedom and access to information, it is expected that the citizenry should possesses information skills. It is lamentable, however, in Nigeria, that a large segment of the population lacks these skills, even for the use of conventional libraries. It is not everybody that can read and write, but only about 60-70% of the population can. About 30 – 40% of Nigerians cannot therefore use our libraries because their services are virtually book-centred. Even among the literate library users, most of them lack the skill for the use of bibliographic aids such as abstracts, indexes, catalogues, etc, whether in ;print or electronic formats.

The non-;possession of the skills for the use of the library and information centres/services is worse still when it comes to ICT, which are even hardly available in the first place. Even where ICTs are available, infrastructural inadequacies as

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observed earlier make it near-impossible if not impossible to use them. This lack of IT and computer literacy makes it impossible for most users to use information in digitised or electronic format. Due to low capacity development in this area, most Nigerians, including some of our intellectuals are inadequately equipped to join in intellectual discourses using online forums, wikis and blogs. These disadvantages, which are brought about both by institutional and personal inadequacies restrict them from contributing their views to discourses in their areas of interests.

Universal Access to Information

Universal access to information is one of the requirements for attaining intellectual freedom and access to information. This is difficult to achieve in Nigeria even locally due to the failure of publishers to comply with legal deposit provisions and the lack of money to purchase local and international publications in both print and electronic formats. As noted earlier, the National Library of Nigeria as the library of last resort is unable to acquire materials from all over the world, and in as many languages as possible because of poor funding. When it comes to electronic materials, we are unable to ;provide access to free-raying databases, and even for open source materials, we are unable to access them because of poor ICT development. Our own local materials too are hardly accessible to the international community because of our failure to digitise and upload them to the Internet, granted that we even have websites. In consequence, virtual access to our local materials is not possible.

As observed earlier, our public libraries are only for the literates, and mainly urban based. Most Nigerians do not have access to information, whether of local or international origin. Another big set-back for universal access to information in

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Nigeria is the failure of the third tier of government to be involved in the ;provision of library services to the people. The Federal Capital Administration, which is one of the wealthiest authorities in Nigeria does not have a library board. Equally inimical to universal access to information is the failure to ;provide materials in languages most Nigerians can read and use. Nigeria is a country of multi-ethnic groups with their respective languages, yet our libraries and information centres peddle information almost exclusively in English, our colonial language.

Knowledge about Information

This is also a requirement for intellectual freedom and access to information. Unfortunately, however, there is poor knowledge or even lack of knowledge about existing information because our libraries have not played any proactive role as social institutions for mass communication, which they ought to rightly be.

Free – Flow of Information

Information is suppressed in Nigeria some of the time by government, organizations, individuals and even librarians in the course of discharge their responsibilities. They restrict access to information, thus breaching another of the ingredient to intellectual freedom, i.e., government commitment to informing the people. This government restriction on the free-flow of information gives rise to rumours and speculations, which are highly relied upon in Nigeria. Rumour is prevalent and relied upon because of the propensity of African governments and their agencies to suppress information. Rumour is not relied upon as sources of information only in Africa but also in many developing countries where dictatorial governments, some of which pretend to be democratic, suppress information. In this

situation, information, which should ordinarily be readily available is deliberately withheld, thus giving room to rumour peddling.

The Nigerian Government's lack of commitment to informing the public, thus subverting the free-flow of information, is responsible for the failure of the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information bill. Another way the government subverts the free-flow of information is the existing official secrets act, which bars public servants from speaking to the press unless they are permitted. Government's lack of interest in publishing, and making available hansards of debates in the National and State assemblies, as well as other publications also thwarts the free-flow of information. Even in the National Assembly Library, one can hardly have access to the hansards of the parent body. The National and State Assemblies also have a way of suppressing information through resort to executive sessions.

The attitude of individuals and organisations (both ethnic and religious) also thwarts the free-flow of information. This attitude was responsible for a group of students invading the Kashim Ibrahim Library in the Ahamdu Bello University, Zaria in the 1990s, from where hey brought out and burnt all the copies of **Nzeogwu,** a book written by former :President Olusegun Obasanjo on the leader of the first military coup in Nigeria. This was in addition to the general protest in most Northern Nigeria cities against the book. Some libraries also thwart the free-flow of information based on ethnic, religious and emotional sensibilities. There are experiences where librarians have refused to put into circulation harmless books like **In the Light of Truth,** or books written on personalities or subjects that are at variance with their convictions.

Protection of Privacy

The protection of primary clause is not much of a problem here because when government through the law enforcement agencies are looking for people who breach the law or are planning to engage in subversive acts, they do act turn their searchlight(s) on library users by checking the records to see the kinds of literature they read. This is probably because there is this popular Nigerian saying that if you want your secrets to remain permanently secret, put them down in books since Nigerians do not read. Not withstanding the above, we should like Catholic Priests who hear confessions and like counsellors, ensure that the privacy of library users is always protected.

A Committed Library and Information Profession

A committed library and information profession is another requirement for intellectual freedom and access to information. For our kind of society where little attention is given to library and information services, we have a more than committed library and information professional bodies. This is easily discernable from the activities of the main Nigerian Library Association and its sections like the Aids Information Centre International Information and Communication Technology, and even the newly established Association of Women Librarians in Nigeria (AWLIN). The major set-back for the Library profession in Nigeria is that most librarians shy away from politics, and our lobbying skill to influence policies is poor, just like funding is also poor to support our activities.

Conclusion

Intellectual freedom and access to information is fundamental for the growth of every nation in all spheres. It is very important because it guarantees the rights of citizens to acquire information skills, have universal access to, knowledge about, and the right to choose what information and ideas to receive and what not to receive, as well as government's commitment to informing the public, protection of privacy, and a committed library and information profession. This is the practice in the developed democracies like Britain, USA, France and others. For us in Nigeria, we are far from being branded as a nation where intellectual freedom and access to information thrives. Our position is as it is because our freedom to express ourselves is curtailed in certain ways, much as access to, free-flow of, government commitment to library and information services, etc are severely curtailed. If we have to reach the promised land in terms of intellectual freedom and access to information, we must learn and practice what the developed democracies are doing, which include relative adequate funding of library and information services provision and providing the required infrastructure for ICT application especially Internet services for our libraries and information centres, among others

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